The Way of Self-Righteousness

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Preacher: Rev. Jeremy Graham

[0:00] Friends, did you have a chance to look at David's rector's note on Friday's newsletter? Do you remember the question that he asked us in that newsletter? It was a great question. He said, What do you think is the most important story in the Bible?

What is the most important story in the Bible? Well, I think that this parable, the parable of the two lost sons, could certainly be in the top ten list, don't you think?
Again, you can imagine that we're climbing up towards a summit here. And we have, as we go through Luke's Gospel, we're almost at the summit and we get this glimpse, just for a moment in Luke 15, of the view that's in front of us.
This panoramic view of the Gospel. And it's told by Jesus with such tenderness, this story. Such tenderness, even though it's actually in the context of a real opposition and hatred from his enemies.
You'd never guess that he's under attack. Luke 15, verses 1 and 2. Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to Jesus, and the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, This man receives sinners and eats with them.
[1:14] Back in Luke 5, Jesus addressed this same kind of grumbling with a punchy comeback. He said, It's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

And really here, he is giving a parable as a response to the very same grumbling. He's giving a parable. It has the same point. What is that point?
Very simply, it's this. Jesus says, If you really know my Father, then you will rejoice over every lost sinner who becomes a found son or daughter.
Or if you want to turn it around and put it the opposite way, if you do not find joy in seeing the lost found, and would rather shun sinners than seek them out, you stand in judgment rather than righteousness.
So his invitation to all of us is simple. Whether you consider yourself to be a follower of Jesus already, or maybe just a pretty decent person who doesn't have a lot of extra time for religion, or you're just feeling today like a bit of an outcast in search of hope.
[2:29] Jesus' invitation is simple. First, remember, remember my Father's love, he says. Remember my Father's love. And second, rejoice in my Father's house.

Remember my Father's love. Tim Keller has a great book on this parable called The Prodigal God. And in that book, he shows how both of these sons reject their father and find themselves lost. Both sons. The younger brother believes that happiness is found in breaking free from the rules and seeking his independence. He wishes his father dead.
He takes his inheritance. And he flees to a far-off country to find self-fulfillment and self-authenticity. But his older brother stays home.
He believes that happiness is found in following the rules and in working hard. He swells with this pride and self-righteousness that we see in verse 29. Look, he says, these many years I have served you and I have never disobeyed your commandments.
[3:40] Yet behind both these brothers' actions is the same lack of trust in their father's love. One breaks the rules because he doesn't trust his father's boundaries are there for his protection and his guidance and his blessing.

And the other keeps the rules because he doesn't trust his father's love and affection are unconditional. And he doesn't need to earn them. Two very different responses, but really the same sickness of the heart.

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So what will the father do with these two rebellious sons? Well, the younger brother hits rock bottom first. And as he fantasizes about eating that pig food.
And he comes to his senses and he begins to rehearse a debt repayment strategy on his way home. Dear dad, I know that I'm not worthy to be part of the family again.
But if you'll apprentice me to one of your hired hands, then maybe I can learn a trade and I can begin to pay you back. Dear dad, I know that I'm not worthy to be, you get the point. He's rehearsing it all the way.
[4:50] What happens when he gets home though? Verse 20. And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion.

And ran and embraced him and kissed him. See, the father's love is a pursuing love. And it's also a costly love. In running forward and embracing his son, this Middle Eastern father, he is throwing off all of the social conventions, all of the expected etiquette for the sake of reconciliation.
And then the son begins his speech. Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you and I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Ah! The father doesn't even let him finish his rehearsed speech.
He interrupts him in verse 22. But the father said to his servants, Bring quickly, bring quickly the best robe and put it on him and put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet and bring the fattened calf and kill it.
And let us eat and celebrate. For this my father, my son, was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. And they began to celebrate. And here we see the full cost of the father's love, which hints at Jesus' sacrifice in our place, on the cross, to pay for our sin.
[6:14] The robe and the ring and the shoes, they all represent restored status, that he is a son now again, not a servant. Now we know that the son deserves to be shunned by the village.

He deserves to face the full weight of punishment for wishing his father dead. Yet, this father publicly shields his son from that just punishment.
He takes the blame on himself by running, by embracing, by placing the family robe on his son's shoulders. This is the beautiful gospel. Jesus takes my place, my blame, my sin, and my shame. There is no sin that cannot be forgiven. No shame that will cause the loving father to turn away from us. And so Jesus says, receive, therefore, this gift of adoption as sons and daughters.
First then, Jesus says, remember my father's love for you. Do you know this love? Do you remember this love? Have you received this love? But what about the older brother?
[7:26] That brings us to Jesus' second invitation. Jesus says, rejoice in my father's house. Luke is the gospel of joy.

20 times, 20 times Luke mentions rejoicing or joy. It's the most in the whole New Testament. And the book begins with joy and it ends with joy.
Right at the beginning, at Christmas, we say this every Christmas. The angel said to them, fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Joy at the beginning and then joy at the end.
Luke 24, 52, the last verse in the whole gospel. And the disciples worshipped Jesus and returned to Jerusalem with great joy. Joy is at the heart of the gospel and of our life in Christ.
It's the source, the source of this great joy though, is the saving work of Jesus' death and resurrection. And really, that's what makes Christian joy so different from just happiness.
[8:33] Here's a quote from Adela Rogers St. John. She's a 20th century American journalist. She did not know the joy of Christ personally, but she spoke quite eloquently on it nonetheless.

Joy, she says, seems to me a step beyond happiness. Happiness is a sort of atmosphere you can live in sometimes when you're lucky. Joy is a light that fills you with hope and faith and love.
And King David recognized this objective joy as well. In your presence, O Lord, there is fullness of joy. Psalm 16, verse 11. You see, joy is right in the character of God.
The character of God is joyful. Joy is found in His presence because God is joy. It's in His nature and so He shares it with us as a spiritual gift. Joy, therefore, is a spiritual response then.
It comes out of our love for God and it pours out in joy. Joy at God's saving work in our life and joy also at glimpsing that saving work in other people's lives.
[9:47] Remember the context of this parable. And this brings us back to how we started before we watched the video together with that question.

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What is a party? What makes a great party? What makes the best sign for joy? Well, the best sign for joy, I think, is feasting. That's certainly the sign in the Bible for joy.
It's feasting all through Scripture from Genesis to Revelation. And in this parable, Jesus describes this feast with music and with dancing and with roast beef. Rejoice!
My son was dead and is now alive. Salvation is cause for celebration. Which is also why Jesus gave us a symbolic feast to remember His atoning body and blood and to joyfully receive His presence by faith in the bread and the wine.
You think of communion as a feast? As a symbolic feast? Isn't that a beautiful picture? It's also why ever since the beginning of the church, eating together has been such a central part of the Christian life.
[11:02] It's one of the hardest things that we've experienced during COVID, isn't it? It's not being able to do that. And it's also why we go to the trouble of planning things like the picnic today after church.

is to, in some small way, capture again that sense of joy that we have in Christ. When we feast together, we experience that joy. We're reminded of Jesus' death and resurrection.
And yet, the older brother in the parable is unwilling to enter the party. He's still on the outside. And he stands outside so angry and bitter and resentful of his father's generosity towards this sinful younger brother.
But look again the father's tenderness towards him. Again, at great cost, he comes out to find his lost son. And he hears these words of judgment from his son in verse 29.
You never even gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, not my brother, I'm not associating with, this son of yours came home who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.
[12:12] But do you see how this brother is relating to this, this not father but this master. He's not a son but a servant.

He is earning a wage not receiving the grace of God. And there's great spiritual danger here for us brothers and sisters. In fact, far greater danger for this older brother in his lostness than for the younger brother.
this danger of pride and self-righteousness. Yet nonetheless, again we see the father's radical love in verse 31.
Son, you are always with me. Don't you know you're always with me? And all that is mine is yours. All that is mine is yours. Not just a little goat, not even the fattened calf.
Everything is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad for this your brother was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found. Won't you come in and celebrate with me? And that's how the story ends.
[13:19] Cliffhanger. Will the older brother accept the invitation and go into the party? We don't know. But Jesus ends it that way deliberately because that question hangs over you and I, each one of us.

will you accept the father's invitation and enter the party? Well, boys and girls, I just want to get your attention for a moment and let you know that in about one minute here I'll be ready to see some of your pictures.
So if you're almost ready for me, be ready to come up right away when I call you, okay? And as we close this parable, we stand again at that edge of the cliff and we're looking out at this beautiful view of the gospel in front of us.
What makes this story so special, so important? It presents in stark contrast what it looks like to be lost and what it looks like to be found.
What it looks like to be outside of the beautiful, joyful presence of God and what it looks like to be in that famine, right? And what it looks like to be in the father's house.
[14:25] And as Jesus presents this gospel, he also exposes all the subtle reasons that we have for deflecting his gift of salvation.

Because deep down, all of us have moments where we are the younger brother and we have moments where we are the older brother. We have moments where we are turning away from God and disobeying and moments where we are trying so hard to earn his approval.
But what does Christ offer us in response? A tender invitation. He says, remember my father's love for you. And then come in and rejoice in my father's house.

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Amen.

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